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SUBJECT: MOROCCAN NGO FOR CIVIC EDUCATION, DEMOCRACY

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Forum for Citizenship is an NGO that promotes democratic principles, civic education, and open political dialogue. While its efforts have been successful, particularly in creating clubs to educate youth about democracy, it counts among its challenges regional instability and the assistance of outsiders who are didactic rather than cooperative. The organization looks towards the 2007 parliamentary elections as a test case for the success of its laudable efforts to encourage genuine democratic participation in Morocco. Its leaders note, however, that political parties in Morocco remain, for the most part, timid and empty of content, a situation which must change in order for democratic principles to take root. END SUMMARY.

FORUM FOR CITIZENSHIP

¶12. (U) Founded in 1999, the Forum for Citizenship (Forum de la Citoyennete) is a Casablanca-based non-governmental organization (NGO) whose mission is to promote democratic principles and citizenship in Morocco. To this end, the organization has four main goals. First, it aims to educate Moroccan youth about democracy, and to encourage Moroccans to participate actively in civic life. Second, it strives to improve relations between civic actors, including elected officials, local leaders and average citizens, via training and roundtables. Third, it supports social science research that examines such issues as changes in the Moroccan mentality towards democratic practices. Finally, the Forum for Citizenship offers a space for open dialogue between union members, politicians, businessmen, artisans, and anyone who would like to discuss issues of importance to Morocco and its development.

WHY IT EXISTS

¶13. (SBU) During a visit to the Forum for Citizenship's offices on November 1, CG and EconOff met with staff members to learn more about the Forum's goals and aspirations. The organization's president, Abdelali Masour, started by explaining the evolution of Morocco's NGOs. While numerous associations arose following independence to address emerging questions concerning democracy, human rights, and the constitution, they did not begin to specialize into well-defined niches until the 1990s. According to Masour, Moroccans now depend more on NGOs to address critical issues than they do on political parties, which do not adequately represent all levels of society. Moreover, political parties in Morocco, in general, are reluctant to stake out opposing positions on key national issues. Masour's

explanation revealed not only the vital role that NGOs play in Morocco today, but also the particular importance of an NGO that teaches people to become active participants in the public sphere.

¶ 14. (SBU) Masour noted that education about democracy is weak in Morocco since not enough effort had been devoted to it. According to him, "there is no development without democracy." His organization therefore tries to educate people, particularly youth, about what democracy is and how it works. To do this, the Forum for Citizenship has started educational clubs across the country where specially trained presenters teach democratic principles which they hope will spread throughout neighborhoods and communities. Some clubs have existed since 2001, and the organization signed a partnership agreement with the Secretary of State in Charge of Youth in December 2004 to continue its efforts in civic education and democratic awareness.

CHALLENGES

¶ 14. (SBU) When asked what challenges the organization faces, Masour spoke at length about the need for national and international stability. While Morocco has a great deal of potential, Masour argues that its internal problems and those of the Middle East in general make it more difficult for the Forum for Citizenship to pursue its agenda, presumably because people are preoccupied with other issues. Still, he said that various organizations in the Maghreb have worked together on issues relating to civic education and responsibility, citing a conference in Algeria and one for female journalists in Casablanca.

¶ 15. (SBU) Masour also said that, while he and his organization welcome U.S. support, they do not like it when outsiders impose their ideas or tell them what to do. He was referring directly to the Forum for Citizenship's experience with the International Republican Institute (IRI), which he felt had acted as a middleman between the Forum and government officials, rather than as a partner promoting direct communication. Work with other organizations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI), USAID, and the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) has been more successful. Masour noted that American organizations can best assist Morocco by supporting civil society and sharing their experiences, for example finding stability after World War II or establishing a religiously and culturally diverse nation.

2007 Parliamentary Elections

¶ 16. (U) The Forum for Citizenship views parliamentary elections in 2007 as a test case for the effectiveness of what they teach. Not only do they hope to gauge whether recent reform in Morocco has changed people's attitudes, but also whether participation in the political process increases. Ideally, the Forum wants to improve the ability of associations to influence elections by encouraging them to talk to candidates and elected officials about their programs. They also strive to inculcate the importance of voting in youth; even if they are too young to vote now, they will be able to do so in the future.

¶ 17. (SBU) COMMENT: The Forum for Citizenship and its president, Abdelali Masour, are a dynamic group that is committed not only to spreading democratic principles, but also to putting them into practice. The fact that the organization's promotional and educational materials are all in Arabic, and that Mr. Masour himself claims to be more comfortable in Arabic than in French, suggests that the Forum operates at the grassroots level where their efforts are most needed. It is encouraging to find a stable and committed NGO that strives to make Morocco's political space truly participatory.
END COMMENT.

Greene